

# Maryland's Conscientious Counties

Tim Maloney's Dec. 13 Close to Home piece about Maryland's fiscal conundrum painted a picture of a state facing such dire fiscal circumstances that it might need to revisit its most critical constitutional commitment—funding for public education. That ignored the broader picture.

Although Maryland's budget imbalance is caused in part by the economy, it is primarily fueled by the state's recent tax cuts, which will cost about \$800 million in the coming year's budget. That figure represents about two-thirds of the budget shortfall.

Just last year the General Assembly was told by its own blue-ribbon panel, the Thornton Commission, that the state was not honoring its constitutional responsibility to public schoolchildren. Maryland's counties were contributing nearly \$1 billion more than the state to public education. Maryland's response was a bill passed in the 2002 session that will take five

years to secure state parity with the counties' contributions. Many state legislators who were sent back to Annapolis this fall proudly campaigned on this evidence of their commitment to public education.

While the state was cutting taxes, 18 of Maryland's 24 counties raised taxes, primarily to fund public safety and education. For example, when Maryland launched its "10 percent teacher salary challenge" in 1999—offering to tack on an extra 2 percent teacher salary increase if the counties kicked in 8 percent—23 of Maryland's 24 counties met the challenge. Not surprisingly, 1999 saw the biggest county tax increases in recent memory.

Maloney fueled the misperception that county employees are better paid than state employees by offering an example from Montgomery County, the jurisdiction with the highest cost of living in the state. He also singled out one class of employee. But when the

whole state is considered, the average weekly wages of Maryland's state employees are higher than those of its local government workers.

Regardless, counties plead guilty to investing their tax-increase revenue in salary increases for the public employees residents value most—teachers, police officers and firefighters. Maloney predicted that "difficult decisions" lie ahead for state policymakers. But he didn't acknowledge that difficult—and responsible—decisions have already been made by county policymakers and that a retreat by the state from its commitments would fund Maryland's monumental tax cuts on the backs of its counties.

**—Marilyn J. Praisner**

*a Democrat, is a member of the Montgomery County Council and acting president of the Maryland Association of Counties.*